

Investigation and Analysis of Parent-Child Relationship in Adolescence

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Abstract:

Based on the study of parent-child relationship in adolescence among parents of 1,855 middle school students in 14 cities in China, it could be concluded that parent-child relationship in adolescence nowadays is generally in good condition but varies according to students' gender and grades. The parent-child relationship is affected by parents' concerns of children's academic achievements, frequency and scope of parent-child interaction and evaluation as well as expectations of children by parents. To optimize the parent-child relationship, the mutual understanding between parents and children needs to be improved. From the perspective of the two-way interaction, parents shall perfect themselves gradually, adapt themselves to the changes of their children, make changes to communication approach and duly adjust the expectations and criterion of evaluation of children according to the characteristics of children. Meanwhile, the children shall put themselves in their parents' shoes and try to understand them as much as possible.

Key Words: Adolescence, Parent-child Relationship, Parent-child Interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

Parent-child relationship is an extremely important element in the personality formation and especially the socialization of a child from infancy to childhood and adolescence, as said by Takuma Taketoshi, a Japanese scholar (Meng, 1998). And, the adolescence, as indicated by H.K. Kpynckag, the former Soviet Union educator, is the most unstable stage with the strongest plasticity and the biggest crisis, for individual's thinking develops towards a formal operation characterized by independence, criticalness and logicity along with the physiological maturity. Such physiological and psychological changes are frequently manifested by the fact that the teenagers begin to constantly examine, challenge or even openly defy the parental authority they blindly obeyed in the past, thus the original parent-child relationship pattern is broken up and enters into a stage with a transformation from the one-way authority with parents in the dominant position to a two-way authority with parents and children in a relatively equal status. The parent-child relationship is in an incompatible state characterized by independence and reliance as well as conflict and harmony. How to ensure a stable parent-child relationship during this critical stage? To answer this question, it is necessary to explore the basic conditions and influencing factors of the parent-child relationship in adolescence.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Respondent:

The data used in this article were taken from the questionnaire survey conducted among a group of students who participated in the research project "Socialization Process and Results of Teenagers as Only Child in China". Using the multi-stage random sampling, students from junior one to senior three in 14 cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Wuhan and Nanjing, were selected as the research objects in such survey and information was collected through self-administered questionnaire. 1868 questionnaires were sent out in the whole survey and 1,855 were available with an effective response rate of 99.3%, boy students accounting for 45.3% and girl students accounting for 54.7%.

2.2 Indicator variable:

Based on previous research on parent-child relationship and relevant theory, this article took the basic characters of parents and children, the academic achievements and living conditions of children, parent-child interactions and Parents' Evaluation and Expectations of Children as independent variables and parent-child relationship as the dependent variable.

2.3 Statistical methods:

SPSS15.0 statistical software was adopted to analyse relevant data.

3. RESULTS

3.1 General Characteristics of Parent-child Relationship in Adolescence

The parent-child relationship was in good condition in general, as shown by the statistical results (see Table 1 and Table 2). During the period at junior high school, 81.8% or 84.9% of father-son (daughter) enjoyed a “Good Relationship” or a “Great Relationship”, respectively; meanwhile, 91.4% or 91.8% of mother-son (daughter) enjoyed a “Good Relationship” or a “Great Relationship”, respectively. The percentage of good father-son (daughter) relationship and great mother-son (daughter) relationship in senior high school also reached over 73.6% and 85.6%, respectively.

3.2 Gender Characteristics of Parents of Parent-child Relationship in Adolescence

With the gender of parents taken into consideration, the mother-son (daughter) relationship was superior to the father-son (daughter) relationship in general (see Table 1 and Table 2). From junior one to senior three, the percentage of respondents with a great mother-son (daughter) relationship was higher than that of those with a great father-son (daughter) relationship. Especially in junior one and senior three, the parent-child relationship showed a more distinct difference in terms of the gender of parents.

3.3 Gender Characteristics of Children of Parent-child Relationship in Adolescence

From the comparison of gender of children, daughters and sons varied in their parent-child relationship status. The father-daughter relationship and mother-daughter relationship were superior to father-son relationship and mother-son relationship; a daughter seemed to be more skilled in dealing with the relationship with their parents in comparison with a son (see Table 1 and Table 2). Furthermore, a son and a daughter experienced inconsistent changes in parent-child relationship status in different stages. The relationship between a son and his parents saw an inconspicuous change at junior high school; however, during the senior high school, the proportional variation trend of a good and great parent-son relationship status was a downward curve rather than the U-shaped curve in general (see Table 1 and Table 2); the relationship between a daughter and her parents basically reflected the overall change trend, i.e. the parent-child relationship witnessed a slight rise in good and great relationship status at junior high school and underwent a low point in senior two.

3.4 Grade Characteristics of Parent-child Relationship in Adolescence

According to the grade characteristics, the father-child relationship at junior high school saw a gradual improvement trend along with grade and age, with the percentage of great father-son (daughter) relationship rising from 81.8% in junior one to 84.9% in junior three, while the mother-child relationship maintained at a relatively stable and good level without distinct variation trend; during the senior high school, the father (mother)-child relationship experienced a similar variation trend of a U-shaped curve (Sternberg, 1981). The highest percentage of a common or bad parent-child relationship occurred in senior two, with father-

son (daughter) relationship and mother-son (daughter) relationship accounting for 25.7% and 13.3%, respectively. At senior three, however, such relationship returned to a percentage similar to that of senior one; the parent-child relationship at senior high school was obviously inferior to that at junior high school.

Table 1 Father-son (daughter) Relationship Status (%) N=1,855

Father-son (daughter) Relationship Status	Grade					
	Junior One	Junior Two	Junior Three	Senior One	Senior Two	Senior Three
Great	47.1	52.0	52.4	46.1	39.5	42.7
Good	34.7	31.0	32.5	32.3	34.1	35.5
Common	14.1	14.6	13.3	19.4	23.8	19.9
Not Good	2.1	1.0	1.4	1.6	1.9	1.6
Very Bad	2.1	1.4	0.3	0.6	0.6	0.3
Total	(291)	(294)	(286)	(310)	(311)	(307)

$X^2=33.362$ $p=0.031$

Table 2 Mother-son (daughter) Relationship Status (%) N=1,855

Mother-son (daughter) Relationship Status	Grade					
	Junior One	Junior Two	Junior Three	Senior One	Senior Two	Senior Three
Great	60.3	59.6	59.7	55.8	49.7	57.5
Good	31.5	31.8	31.7	32.6	36.9	30.1
Common	6.5	7.9	8.3	10.6	12.7	11.1
Not Good	0.7	—	0.3	1.0	0.6	1.0
Very Bad	1.0	0.7	—	—	—	0.3
Total	(292)	(292)	(290)	(310)	(314)	(306)

$X^2=27.452$ $p=0.123$

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Influence of Concerns about Children's Academic Achievements from Parents on Parent-child Relationship

Compared with students in primary school, middle school students are faced with greater academic pressure, with academic study gradually becoming the core of their life. Therefore, academic study gains more parental attention, compared to the education of children in ideological quality, behavioral norms, living habits, etc. Parents' attitudes towards the academic study of children also undergo some changes with their children entering middle school. For example, over 30% of parents sent their middle-school children to some amateur training classes (in subjects such as composition, math, English and computer), which saw a great increase compared to the percentage in primary school. The causes boil down to the following two points: (1) the ability and energy of parents in giving guidance to children in academic study declines. Only 8.2% of parents tended to give frequent guidance in study; 48.5% of parents never gave guidance in study and they employed private teachers or sent their children to training classes, etc; (2) parents held a different attitude towards their children's study with a utilitarian attitude in the dominant position. As shown in Table 3, the first two causes reflect the pragmatic attitude of parents, with the personality development of children coming second.

Parents' guidance in children's study is an effective way of parent-child communication, which will contribute to the improvement of parent-child relationship. The guidance given in children's study by parents at middle school level is largely characterized by the following two points: (1) from the longitudinal angle, parents play an increasingly insignificant role in children's study over time. Children tend to seek help from their classmates and teachers if problems arise in study. In junior high school, 44.1% children tended to seek advice from their parents when running into difficulties in study; while in senior high school, the percentage declined to 27.5%; (2) with a role shift between parents, the father begins to take a leading role in the study of children. When running into difficulties in study, more children would seek advice from their fathers rather than their mothers. Similarly, fathers spent more time in giving guidance to children in their study. The role shift between parents brought about a change in parent-child relationship. From Table 4, we can see that parents' concern about children's study plays a more important role in the father-son (daughter) relationship status than in the mother-son (daughter) relationship status.

Table 3 Reasons of Parents Sending Children to Attend Training Classes (%) N=1,855

No.	Causes	Efficient Frequency
1	To the benefit of admission to a senior high school and a college/university	27.4
2	Children will possess some professional skill.	22.2
3	The child is interested in the training classes and he/she wants to attend such classes.	19.5
4	To enrich children's leisure time	18.6
5	Be helpful for the children to apply for a job in the future	7.5

6	To drift with the tide	1.6
7	Others	3.3

Table 4 Influences of Concerns about Children’s Study by Parents on Parent-child Relationship (Gamma Coefficient of Correlation)

Parent-child Relationship Status		Concerns about Study		
		Frequency in checking homework	Frequency in giving guidance in study	
Father-son Relationship Status	(daughter)	0.161(p=0.000)	0.209(p=0.000)	
Mother-son Relationship Status	(daughter)	0.139(p=0.000)	0.195(p=0.000)	

Parents held a relatively positive and pragmatic attitude towards the academic record of their children. If the children did well in examinations, 71.4% of parents would praise their children and 11.4% would give material rewards or go for an outing with their children. Parents would adopt a more positive and pragmatic attitude when their children made poor marks. Meanwhile, due to the fact that they were less capable of giving guidance to their children in study, most parents tried to comfort and encourage their children instead of giving help patiently. For example, 19.5% of parents provided help patiently and 54.6% of parents gave comfort and encouragement instead. Similarly, parents adopting a positive attitude towards their children’s poor academic records enjoyed a better parent-child relationship status compared to those adopting a negative or even rude attitude, which implied that the difference in attitudes would produce a certain interpretation power to parent-child relationship status.

As for children’s life, most parents placed certain restrictions on children and 70.5% of parents stipulated the time that their children spent in front of TV. At the same time, we found that the self-care ability of children was reinforced constantly with the growth of age, but little change in participation in housework had taken place. Families carrying out education with patience when their children did some wrong enjoyed a better parent-child relationship status in comparison with those who simply criticized, scolded their children or even adopted corporal punishment. Moreover, 45% of children felt that their parents were unduly concerned about their life, which manifested that the teenagers longed for independence and some parents demanded over perfection in cultivating their children.

4.2 Influences of Parent-child Interaction on Parent-child Relationship

We could see from the survey results that the frequency of parent-child interaction was not high. Compared with the mother-son (daughter) interaction, the frequency of joint activities between father and son (daughter) was much lower; mothers were the most important listeners of children’s innermost thoughts and feelings and classmates were the second important listeners

instead of fathers. 30.8% of children were willing to confide their innermost thoughts and feelings to their classmates, while only 10.3% of children tended to confide such thoughts and feelings to their fathers. Meanwhile, the widening gap of parents as listeners also produced some corresponding change of influences on the father-son (daughter) and mother-son (daughter) relationship status. As for the question who understood children more, 42.8% of families chose mothers while 17.9% chose fathers.

Compared with the father-child communication, children and their mothers shared more time in communicating. 43.2% of children were frequently communicating with their mothers about matters they were interested in, while only 29.5% tended to talk with their fathers about such matters. Children mainly talked with their fathers about matters in studies, news and current events, matters in class, etc.; they talked with their mothers about matters in studies, matters in class, household affairs, etc. The difference in contents of conversation showed the roles of parents in children's socialization. From Table 4 and Table 5 we could see the superficiality trend of parent-child communication through the differences in the contents of children's conversations with friends and parents; children tended to open their mind to their friends far beyond to their parents. The Somers'd coefficient of correlation between the frequency of parent-child communication and the father-son (daughter) relationship as well as the mother-son (daughter) relationship was 0.419 ($p=0.000$) and 0.380 ($p=0.000$), respectively, and this strong correlation highlighted the importance of parent-child communication in a harmonious parent-child relationship.

Table 5 Differences in Contents of Conversations with Parents and Friends (%) N=1,855

Contents of Conversation	Father	Mother	Friends
Matters in studies	29.1	26.6	17.0
Household affairs	6.0	13.1	1.2
Matters in class	16.3	27.7	22.0
Individual mood	2.0	9.4	26.4
Prospects, ideals and future development	15.3	11.3	14.3
To learn how to conduct oneself	3.4	4.2	1.3
Artistic and sports activities	9.2	3.2	8.1
Social events and current news	17.8	3.2	5.9
Others	0.9	1.3	3.9

The parent-child conflict is another side of the parent-child interaction. According to the conflict theory, a conflict is both negative and positive. A conflict within a certain range will

produce no harm to the social relationship, but will be beneficial to the stability of social relationship. However, our research results indicated that the parent-child conflict, instead of functioning as a “safety valve” and elimination of contradiction, would produce negative influences. The Somers’d coefficient of correlation between the parent-child conflict and the father-son (daughter) relationship as well as the mother-son (daughter) relationship is 0.258 ($p=0.000$) and 0.224 ($p=0.000$), respectively, which showed that the more frequently conflicts took place, the worse parent-child relationship status would be.

4.3 Influences of Evaluation and Expectations of Children from Parents on Parent-child Relationship

Although over 40% of parents still believed that their children shared character flaws of cowardice, caprice, incapability, indolence and incaution, study was a factor with the least satisfaction of parents in the satisfaction evaluation of study, character and physical health. 54% of parents were not so satisfied and disappointed at the academic achievements of their children. From coefficients of correlation in Table 6, we could see that the enterprise, self-esteem, study and character were four relatively important aspects, the positive evaluation of which by parents would be greatly beneficial to the formation of a good parent-child relationship.

Table 6 Influences of Evaluation of Children from Parents on Parent-child Relationship (Gamma Coefficient of Correlation)

Parent-child Relationship Status	Evaluation by Parents						
	Indepen dence	Enter prise	Self- esteem	Communicatio n competence	Study	Characte r	Physica l health
Father-son (daughter) relationship status	0.116*	0.306*	0.261*	0.151*	0.268*	0.369*	0.187*
Mother-son (daughter) relationship status	0.119*	0.340*	0.354*	0.115**	0.244*	0.399*	0.189*

(* $p=0.000$; ** $p=0.001$)

5. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, we could see that children dynamically influenced the attitudes and behaviours of their parents through their own ways while the parents were educating and guiding their children. Therefore, the adjustment of parent-child relationship shall be carried out based on the parent-child interaction.

5.1 Parents to Strengthen the Cultural Awareness and Promote the Educational Influences

Generally speaking, well-educated parents usually tend to treat their children psychologically instead of physiologically. The educational level of parents produces a distinct influence on family relationship. The higher the educational level of parents is, the better the parent-child relationship will be. Therefore, parents shall strengthen their own cultural awareness, for knowledge may enrich one's inner world, enable people to be more wise and confident and allow a person to experience qualitative changes in thought, emotion and behaviour. What's more, as a mature individual in the society, parents also play a role of carrier and disseminator of social values, beliefs and culture. In a society subjected to changes in knowledge at an ever increasing pace, the continuous improvement of cultural quality, moral quality and psychological quality of parents will not only be helpful to improve their ability in adapting to social changes, but will also be helpful for them to better play the role of disseminating the mainstream culture in society in the parent-child relationship.

5.2 Transition of Parent-child Communication from One-way, Superficial and Unilateral Mode to Two-way, Profound and Comprehensive Mode

The comprehensive and effective communication between parents and children is the basis for the formation of a good parent-child relationship. The mutual understanding, tolerance, mutual trust between parents and children, the recognition of children's behavioural competence with increasing development by parents and the mutual learning behaviour between parents and children are important factors influencing the communication effects (Fan, 2001). The children's ability in acquiring and accepting information is gradually improving along with their growth and they may even surpass their parents in some aspects. As for communication, on one hand, the dependence of children on their parents declines; on the other hand, they require to change their status as passive recipients of information in communication due to the pursuit of equality and respect. If parents fail to change the one-way communication into two-way communication or strengthen their status as a sender of information, the frequency of parent-child communication will be reduced and the contents of communication will be restricted. Furthermore, the one-way parent-child communication leads to fewer deeper psychological communications between parents and children with the growth of children (i.e. the communication is carried out superficially and unilaterally). Therefore, the parents shall interact with their children in an equal way to transform the parent-child relationship from a distant type into an intimate type.

5.3 Transition of Evaluation and Expectations of Children by Parents from Utilitarian Type into People-oriented Type

As a certain predictive recognition of the behavioural outcome of children, the expectations from parents determine the attitude and method to educate children. Expectations alienating from the development of children or expectations that are too high or low will go against the

normal growth and harmony of parent-child relationship. Under the present academic and employment pressure, many parents overemphasize the social-need-oriented development of children, which is a utilitarian and immediate judgment standard of children's development by parents. While the human-oriented parent-child relationship takes the character, potentials and intentions of children as the most important basis of development, following a human-oriented and future-directed judgment standard (Fan, 2001).

In the utilitarian criteria of evaluation, the academic achievement of children tends to be much more important than other indexes, which causes the growth of children in other aspects to be neglected. For teenagers in an important stage of physical and mental development, too high expectations of children from parents will influence the establishment of self-identity, which will further be an incentive of the tense parent-child relationship. The establishment of self-identity is a process of gradually realizing the unity of realistic self and ideal self through the efforts of individual. The expectations from parents, the evaluation from teachers and classmates at school and the social culture provide criteria for the ideal self of teenagers. If it is hard for the teenager to reach the ideal self set by parents and teachers through efforts, identity diffusion will occur (e.g. giving up or escaping the pursuit of ideal self), which will further result in a tense parent-child relationship. Therefore, parents shall duly adjust the expectations and criteria of evaluation on children according to their characters, potentials and intentions.

5.4 Children to Understand Parents through "Change-place-reflect"

According to the two-way principle of parent-child relationship, the traits, personality and behavioural styles of children have influences on parental rearing style and further influence the parent-child relationship. The physiological and psychological changes of children will constantly alter the recognition of parents and mode of interaction with parents; therefore, the establishment of a good parent-child relationship also depends on the attitude and behavioural style of children in the parent-child interaction. The children shall face and deal with the increasingly apparent generation gap between parents and children, especially the differences in values, through communication and mutual learning. For example, as for the command of computer, many parents are inferior to their children. If children are aware of this and provide some help to their parents, they will feel happy and confident with the self-value realization while their parents will enjoy the pleasure of keeping up with the times. Furthermore, children will be moved by their parents' thirst for learning, which will realize a harmonious parent-child relationship. The guidance of parents as mature individuals in society will be helpful for teenagers to overcome the embarrassment of strong independent awareness and weak independence. While getting rid of the dependence on parents and developing independence, children shall have a positive outlook on the guidance from parents and accept it to enable themselves to gradually move to maturity.

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